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SUBJECT: CALM CAMPAIGN IN RUSSIAN REGION

REF: A. MOSCOW 03995

[1](#)B. MOSCOW 04140

Classified By: (U) A/DCM Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4(B/D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Changes in election law have created a "calm" campaign atmosphere in Voronezh, a city south of Moscow where during a November 14-15 visit we found scant evidence that a parliamentary election is about to take place. Local party representatives said the lack of single-mandate candidates had resulted in a less competitive campaign than four years ago. Many complained that United Russia is using administrative resources to ensure a high turnout for its party. End summary.

A Calm Campaign

[1](#)2. (C) A November 14-15 visit to Voronezh found a relatively quiet Duma campaign, which local observers attributed to changes in the election law that eliminated single-mandate candidates. During the last election, "you would see leaflets everywhere and candidates on the corners talking to voters," said Sergey Naumov a candidate on Yabloko's regional list. "Today, people are scared." United Russia, which dominates the regional administration was accused by all other party representatives of using administration resources to ensure a disproportionate win.

Just Russia: Visibly Dominant But Suspect

[1](#)3. (C) The only party with a visible campaign presence in Voronezh was Just Russia. Its billboards and campaign stickers featuring images of their federal and regional candidates and their message that "Moscow will help," were found throughout the city. In an earlier trip (ref A), we heard complaints that Voronezh does not receive enough money from the federal budget. This had been a dominant issue in the region and one that had caused disagreement between the regional and city governments.

[1](#)4. (C) Despite this recurring complaint, we were told by Yabloko's Naumov, that Just Russia's message is viewed negatively. Just Russia's regional candidates "are not trustworthy -- especially in the business community," said Naumov, who leads a local business organization. Naumov's comments were echoed by others who said Just Russia has been too aggressive in its campaign and the billboards cause people to wonder where the money comes from.

[1](#)5. (C) Novaya Gazeta Editor Olga Brener said Just Russia

asked her paper to run an article she referred to as "yellow journalism." When she refused, Just Russia distributed the article in mailboxes throughout the region and attempted to turn the newspaper's refusal into a social justice issue. United Russia's representative Vyacheslav Agapov said "they (Just Russia) say what people want to hear, but it's not backed by action." Anna Milova, Public Relations Officer of the Regional Administration informed us that a covenant to conduct fair and clean elections, which was initiated by the local Public Chamber, was signed by all parties except Just Russia.

16. (C) As in other areas of the country, Just Russia in Voronezh has struggled to find its way since Putin decided to head the United Russia list. Only three months ago Just Russia was popular in the region and Federation Council Chairman and party leader Sergey Mironov had visited Voronezh to much fanfare. Recently, Mayor Boris Skrynnikov switched his party affiliation from Just Russia to United Russia. Aleksandr Sysoyev, member of the regional Duma and Just Russia candidate for the state Duma brushed off this defection and accused United Russia of pressuring the most vulnerable people to vote for United Russia. Sysoyev told of a nurse who had been threatened with being fired if she did not stop campaigning for Just Russia. Sysoyev said his party hoped to run a more aggressive campaign but was hampered by lack of access to public places and the mass media, as well as United Russia's influence in the region. Despite these limitations, Sysoyev predicted Just Russia would receive a minimum 20 percent of the vote. To back up his prediction, he cited the past success of political party Rodina in the region. (Just Russia is the product of a merger of Rodina, the Party of Life and the Party of Pensioners.) He was confident that Rodina's loyal voters would cast their ballots for Just Russia.

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Opposition Party Soldiers On

17. (C) Union of Right Forces' (SPS) party leader Yuriy Bezdetko, described the campaign to date as "terrible." Bezdetko reported several incidents in which their rival Just Russia had been targeted, and he suspected the administration was behind these acts. They included hooligans defacing Just Russia billboards and authorities detaining people who distributed Just Russia leaflets. Bezdetko noted that attacks on Just Russia have kept the focus off of SPS, however he said he fully expected SPS to be targeted as well.

Already, the Voronezh office of SPS was vandalized, paralyzing work for several days. Confiscation of campaign leaflets or difficulty finding printers to produce SPS materials was a problem in several regions of Russia but had not occurred in Voronezh "yet" according to Bezdetko. He said this is due to his strategy of "not putting all eggs in one basket."

Communists

18. (C) The Communist party (KPRF) representatives reported that their voters increasingly are coming from urban areas. Communist party regional duma deputy and state duma candidate Sergey Rudakov predicted that KPRF will gain the votes of those who would have voted "against all," an option that has been removed in this election. Rudakov said efforts to attract young people to their party are succeeding. He noted the participation in the Communist factions of the regional and city Duma of deputies in their 30s. Rudakov said he agreed with the elimination of single-mandate candidates because "rich people were buying the mandates." If two parties make it to the Duma -- United Russia and KPRF -- it will be huge political progress, Rudakov said.

United Russia Prepares for Elections; Plans Celebration

¶9. (C) The President's decision to head the United Russia ticket was a blow to opposition parties and an unexpected "sensation" for United Russia, according to party representative Vyacheslav Agapov. He said their local campaign is in full force and will be "clean and fair." Agapov said they are under pressure to ensure a high turnout for United Russia but noted there would be no "Nazarbayev effect." He had no doubt they would receive a high percentage of the vote. They are so confident of their victory that they are prepared to start working December 3, "but we will celebrate first."

¶10. (C) Vladimir Selyanin, the head of the regional election commission, who joined United Russia in August, had adjusted his expectations for voter turnout. In August, Selyanin said, his goal was 75-80 percent (ref B). In a meeting November 15 he noted that while public opinion polls suggest 60 percent, he was hoping for 70 percent. He said their preparations included engaging 16,000 people to work on behalf of the election commission, sending invitations to every family on voter lists, verifying their information, and informing voters about election day procedures. There will be 1,670 polling stations in the Voronezh region of which 400 are in the city. Based on previous elections, Selyanin said he expects 8,000-12,000 domestic observers including political party representatives, representatives of candidates and journalists. Selyanin, who has held his position since 1993, said the biggest challenge they would face on election day was finding a common language between observers and election commission members. And, he noted, the weather was of concern given that many of the rural districts in their region are vast and residents are often unable to leave their homes. Selyanin said the only complaints have been from voters who have called to ask if ads they have seen are legal and to question who paid for them.

Media Plays Minor Role in Campaign

¶11. (C) Novaya Gazeta editor Brener told us the campaign has been difficult to assess because the press is not participating as it normally would. She acknowledged that it sounded strange that a newspaper like Novaya Gazeta would not be involved given its political orientation but she said political parties are only interested in paying to have their articles published without allowing the newspaper to make that fact known to readers. The newspaper has refused to accept these submissions. Brener said the people of Voronezh

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are tired of aggressive campaigns. She predicted turnout will be minimal despite the pressure on United Russia. In general, people want stability which benefits United Russia and KPRF. The newspaper's relationship with the administration is better than one would expect. The biggest challenge is financial due to low ad sales. Despite their occasional criticism of the administration, she described officials as open and professional, which she attributed to Voronezh's rural orientation where personal contacts matter most.

Comment

¶12. (C) United Russia will continue to dominate Voronezh, and the only intrigue surrounds the prospects of Just Russia. While all opposition parties will spend the next two weeks working to reach voters in one form or another, the tide of administrative resources will continue to work against them.

BURNS